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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that active adult involvement in children's play can increase the social level of play and have a beneficial impact on children's cognitive growth. To become appropriately involved in children's play, daycare providers and other adults need to understand how time, space, experiences, and materials affect children in play activities. Children require long stretches of uninterrupted time in order to sustain sociodramatic and constructive play episodes, at least 30 minutes in length. The arrangement and amount of space available for play and children's background knowledge both have a direct impact on the type of play generated. Home-living and theme-related props promote high levels of social interaction and group dramatic play. Three effective play intervention strategies are: (1) parallel play, in which an adult models appropriate play behaviors without interacting with the child; (2) co-play, in which an adult joins in a child-directed play scenario and facilitates learning and development; and (3) play training, in which an adult makes suggestions about playing or encourages children to reenact stories or fairy tales. (MDM)

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ADULT INTERVENTION:

APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES FOR ENRICHING THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S PLAY

PRESENTED AT THE

SOUTHERN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

NEW ORLEANS, LA

APRIL 16, 1994

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Three-year-old Mario has been banging the bristle blocks against the wall for several minutes. Observing this, an adult comes over to sit beside Mario and begins putting the blocks together in various ways. As if talking to herself, the adult verbalizes her actions with the blocks, "I think if I put this red one here, I can make something really different". Mario watches her and reaches for some red bristle blocks to put together.

A group of kindergarteners is busily engaged in dramatic play within the office center. Latasha is watching from the side, randomly twirling the dial on a play phone. This continues for several minutes, until the teacher comments, "Looks like this office could use a phone operator to get more orders. Maybe Latasha could help out here". The group is receptive to this idea and Latasha enters the play episode hesitantly. The teacher backs out and observes the children involve Latasha in their office play, assign roles and duties, and extend the play episode another fifteen minutes.

Many people feel that play is solely the child's domain and that the adult has no right to interfere in any way. After all, every child knows how to play and interruptions from adults might inhibit, disrupt, or reduce the emotional benefits of play.

However, research indicates that active adult involvement in children's play can increase the social level of play and beneficially impact cognitive growth. Smilansky's (1968) landmark research demonstrated that many children do not engage spontaneously in sociodramatic play, an advanced form of make-believe play in which children enact roles, interact verbally, and carry out cooperative dramatizations. Adult intervention in the form of specific play-tutoring strategies (as in the above scenarios) increased the instances and quality of children's sociodramatic play and improved cognitive performance (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

More recently, Patterson (1982) found that kindergarten children's interpersonal problem-solving skills in sociodramatic

play improved when adults gave suggestions from outside the episode, participated as co-players, and stimulated problem-solving behaviors. Appropriate adult intervention can help preschoolers achieve social acceptance (Kemple, 1992) and enhance verbal cognition in their play (Graul & Zeece, 1990). As adults demonstrate interest in children's play, they convey the message that play is a valuable activity, thus building strong rapport with children. In addition, effective adult participation can impact play resulting in longer, richer episodes and more elaborate play (Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey, 1987).

So how can parents and teachers become appropriately involved in children's play? Initially, adults must set the stage so that high quality play can occur, incorporating four key elements: time, space, experiences, and materials (Griffing, 1983).

Time. Children need long stretches of uninterrupted time in order to sustain sociodramatic and constructive play episodes. Generally, 30 to 50 minute time blocks for free play are recommended for preschoolers and kindergarteners, allowing children the freedom to persist and expand upon a play theme (Johnson et al., 1987). This time is needed for children to generate ideas, assign roles, find props, communicate, negotiate, and enact dramatizations.

When engaged in constructive play, a child is more likely to design intricate and elaborate creations using objects (blocks, Legos) or materials (clay, paint, paper) when given ample time to do so. Why pull out lots of blocks when you know the teacher is going to ring a bell in 10 minutes and send you to another center? When children are repeatedly hampered by play periods that are too short, they will resort to very simple forms of play (physical)

and will give up attempts to play sociodramatically and constructively. Therefore, it would seem preferable to schedule several lengthy play periods each week rather than to promote very short play times (10-15 minutes) daily.

Space. It is understood that children need sufficient space in order to play effectively. Licensing standards for early childhood programs offer requirements that include the square footage of usable space per child; experts believe at least 25-30 square feet per child is necessary (Johnson et al., 1987). Research demonstrates that when the amount of space decreases, children exhibit more aggression and less social play behaviors (Rogers & Sawyers, 1988). In addition, the arrangement of space impacts play behavior; children will participate in more sociodramatic play in partitioned areas than in large open spaces (Johnson et al., 1987).

Experiences. In order to act out various roles, children draw upon past experiences and events as they understand them. Play imitates real life as children portray family roles, school interactions, and familiar job-related roles. Sociodramatic play cannot flourish if children have little background experience to express certain roles. Relevant classroom experiences that can extend rich pretend play and help children understand the significance of family and career-related roles include community field trips, classroom visits from people involved in various occupations and hobbies, and exposure to anti-bias literature that explores a wide range of job opportunities (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

Play Materials. It stands to reason that the types of play materials available will affect children's play behavior. The consensus of available research suggests that homeliving and theme-related props (Myhre, 1993), dress-up clothes, dolls, trucks, and other vehicles promote high levels of social interaction and group dramatic play. Block play and accompanying manipulatives can inspire high levels of sociodramatic play, especially when located adjacent to the homeliving center. Instructional materials (puzzles, unifix cubes), art supplies (paint, markers, scissors), clay, and sand tend to be used more often in solitary and parallel play activities (Johnson et al., 1987).

When is it appropriate for adults to become involved in children's play? Jones and Reynolds (1992) agree that when children are playing at sociodramatic levels involving fantasy and make-believe, adult interruptions or attempts to turn the episode into an educational activity ("Let's sort your blocks into piles according to shape...") can serve to disrupt and stifle children's natural play processes. However, adult intervention can be beneficial when 1) children do not initiate or engage in make-believe play, 2) children have difficulty playing with others, and 3) the play episode seems to be repetitious and in danger of breaking down completely (Johnson et al., 1987).

Deciding whether or not to intervene in children's play requires careful observation of children's play patterns, assessment of the skills inherent in sustaining play, and an examination of one's own teaching style. Examples of some effective adult intervention strategies include parallel play, co-play, and play training.

Parallel Play. To intervene using the parallel play strategy, the adult merely positions himself/herself beside the child and models appropriate play behaviors. No attempt is made to interact with the child or to direct the child's play. In the first play scenario above, the adult is using the parallel play strategy to encourage Mario to put the bristle blocks together in new and varied ways. This strategy is nonthreatening, nondirective, and can promote persistence in the play activity. Based on observation that indicates the child's play could use some extending and adult scaffolding, parallel play can enable children to learn new play behaviors and creative uses of play materials by watching adults model these actions.

Co-Play. "Mrs. Ward, come here and play with us!" These words, issued by my kindergarteners in the homeliving center, were too good to be ignored. The children were urging me to be a co-player in their evolving restaurant episode, which was a high-level sociodramatic scenario involving make-believe and lots of conversation.

CHILD 1: Welcome to our restaurant. Please have a seat right here.

ME: Thank you so much! I am really hungry! Can I see a menu?

CHILD A: (Looks around) Here's a menu (hands me a piece of paper with scribbles on it). What do you want?

ME: Well, what do you think is the best thing you cook?

CHILD B: I'm the cooker. I think the fried chicken is gooder and so is the pudding.

ME: That sounds wonderful. I'll order the chicken with broccoli and chocolate pudding.

CHILD A: (to CHILD B): You start cooking and I'll get her some water. (To me): We'll be right back with your supper.

CHILD B: (fixes a plate with a block and green playdough on it).

CHILD A: (brings out a plastic coffee cup) Here is your water and here (takes from child 2) is your yummy chicken and broccoli.

ME: It looks delicious! Yum--this hits the spot!

In this episode, I joined the existing play in progress and responded to the actions and comments of the children. The children controlled the direction of the play episode, but my responses added to its context by asking for information ("Can I see a menu?"), adding new elements (broccoli), and responding to the children's initiatives ("It looks delicious!").

The benefits of co-play are congruent with those seen in parallel play; persistence in the play episode is encouraged and the adults model various play behaviors. Because the adult has been invited and is following the children's lead, rapport is easily established and the play episode is in no danger of disintegrating due to adult intrusion. The adult is in a much better position to facilitate play-related language exchanges, ask higher level questions to extend the play, and include other children in the play.

The co-play technique is most effective when children are already playing at high levels of dramatic and/or constructive play. For children who rarely engage in these types of sociodramatic play, specific play training strategies may be necessary.

Play Training. In play training, the adult establishes a more pronounced role in the play episode, taking more control in its direction while teaching new play behaviors. Smilansky (1968)

promoted two types of play tutoring in her efforts to encourage more sociodramatic play in children: outside intervention and inside intervention. In addition, thematic fantasy training promotes confidence and desired play behaviors with teacher guidance.

Outside Intervention. To employ outside intervention, the adult makes suggestions from the side without actually entering the play episode itself. In the second play scenario above, the teacher observes Latasha sitting by herself engaged in a relatively low level of play-- manipulating the telephone dial aimlessly. Noting the group nearby involved in office play with related props, the adult encourages Latasha to take on the role of phone operator and join the group. In this case, the intervention is successful; Latasha's level of social interaction, make-believe, role-playing, and verbal communication is greatly enhanced by moving from functional play to sociodramatic play.

Inside Intervention. In this type of play training, the teacher participates within the play episode by taking on a role and modeling sociodramatic play behaviors that the children have not been practicing. It differs from co-play in that the adult has specific strategies in mind and more directly impacts the course of the play episode.

For example, the adult observes three children in the homeliving area playing in a parallel manner. One child is daydreaming at the stove, another is sitting at the table playing with a cup, and the other child is pulling containers out of the refrigerator. There has been no interaction between the three children, so the teacher enters the area with a doll and announces, "Hi! I'm your neighbor, Mrs. Allen. Today's the day

you invited us for lunch, right? Oh, you forgot? No trouble--I'll help you make lunch for us." She sits the baby in the high chair, saying, "Here honey, let me get you a cracker" and places a small block on the tray. The teacher encourages the children by rolling out some play dough; soon the children are talking together, taking on family roles, and making "sandwiches" and "cakes".

While the most intrusive of the intervention strategies discussed thus far, inside intervention used appropriately can encourage the development of sociodramatic play. The adult in this example took on a role and used make-believe transformations (e.g., the block as a cracker, play dough for food), thus modeling play behaviors for children to imitate and employ as a part of their play repertoire. Social interaction and verbal exchanges are fostered as the three children become involved in the scenario initiated by the adult. Roles are assigned, a theme is pursued, and persistence in the play is attained due to the rich adult-child interactions.

Thematic-Fantasy. In thematic fantasy training, the adult engages the children in reenacting favorite fairy tales, folk tales, and stories with predictable and repetitive plots. For example, the teacher reads the story Caps for Sale (Slobodkina, 1940) aloud to the children and discusses it so that all are familiar with the story line. Then children take on the roles of the peddler and the monkeys, while the adult acts as the narrator and prompts as necessary. The story is reenacted repeatedly as interest dictates, with children swapping roles and taking control of the play. Simple props, such as "caps" of brown, gray, blue, red, and checked fabric circles, can enhance

the reenactments the children pursue independently.

Thematic-fantasy play is initiated by adults, which inherently makes it a more structured experience. However, it benefits those children who have not attempted much sociodramatic play by modeling role-taking, pretend situations, use of imagination, and make-believe transformations. It is non-threatening; children can choose to be the dominant peddler, be one of the many monkeys, be an onlooker, or choose another activity. Thematic fantasy play promotes story comprehension and competence in social skills such as turn-taking, verbal problem-solving, and negotiating (Williamson, 1993).

While benefits of each play-tutoring approach have been discussed, critics may note the level of adult involvement as a deterrent to the natural, intrinsic process of children's play. Basic disadvantages of play training include the possibility of disrupting beneficial solitary and/or parallel play, changing the activity so it is no longer play at all, and focusing inappropriately on directed teaching. To avoid these negative effects, teachers should conduct careful observation of children's play skills and interests before any intervention strategy is chosen. After joining in and playing with the children, it is recommended that the adult ease out of the play episode as soon as children are controlling its direction and exhibiting sociodramatic play behaviors such as role enactment and pretend play.

In summary, we know that appropriate adult encouragement and modeling in children's play can raise the level of children's play, foster positive adult-child interactions, and promote cognitive and social competence. Adult involvement in child's

play should be minimally disruptive and viewed as a tool to support and extend play opportunities, not strategies to be forced upon unwilling children. Play personalities should be approached with respect as adults follow each child's lead; intervention strategies should never be forced upon unwilling participants. Finally, adults should give up notions that playing with children is unnecessary, harmful, trivial, or embarrassing. For children to grow and develop into "master players" (Jones & Reynolds, 1992), their ideas must be nourished, sustained, and extended by playful adults.

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